

Secrets of Liberty Mountain: No Man's Land

(A Work in Progress)

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Dedication

I dedicate this novel to:

My wife and bride of 35 years, Judy, for her support and encouragement of my writing.

Stephanie Nix, thank you for believing in my ability, even when my faith wavered.

My readers and BETA readers, bless you all.

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CHAPTER 1

I stuffed my last cardboard box of personal belongings into the cargo hold of my girlfriend's Toyota Rav4, jumped into the passenger seat, and waited while she fussed over a map with directions to our new home. Darlene was like that—a stickler for details.

She flipped her shoulder-length hair out of her eyes for the umpteenth time and squinted to read the tiny letters. Mapmakers tended to hide the most critical information in the smallest print known to man.

Finally finished, she turned to me and smiled. "Let's go!" She put the Rav into drive, and we started on our way. We were going to start a new life off the grid.

Darlene was a smart, feisty, and petite brown-haired woman, just under five feet five inches tall, with small breasts, and a freckled baby face. Her soft and innocent musical voice accented her thoughts with honey and desire. To me, she sounded like exotic ear-candy.

She was more than she seemed and used a different song for every mood and season. When angry, sarcastic sandpaper replaced honey as her words scoured lies and deceit away from facts until only the naked truth remained.

She'd allowed me to move in with her and we shacked-up to save money when my landlord evicted me because I refused to pay until he fixed the bathroom in my crappy apartment. He decided a new tenant would be cheaper than new plumbing. Darlene and I believed that two could live as cheaply as one. We were right, but only for half as long.

We met at a local tavern where we developed an unlikely May-December relationship. She played the part of May at the youthful age of thirty-five. I fulfilled the role of December at the tender age of sixty-mumble.

Through the process of elimination, we had become drinking buddies at our local tavern. I'm not sure "buddies" is the correct word. More often than not, we happened to be the last people still standing when the barkeep bellowed out, "Last call for alcohol!"

Initially, geography was our common bond. The tavern, built in the 1890s, featured a walnut and mahogany bar with an odd little 'L' shaped hook at the far corner of the saloon. The bar and a back wall of brick formed a naturally cozy alcove large enough to accommodate three bar stools.

According to local legend, the original owner ordered the hook's construction to allow him to observe activities of untrustworthy bartenders while also keeping an eye on equally unreliable patrons. The voyeur and hermit in me loved the location, and I had it

all to myself for several months until the day Darlene arrived. She also loved the strategic observatory.

At first, I was annoyed at the invasion of my secret space. After a while, I looked forward to her company. Like commuters sharing an across town bus, we got used to each other's presence on the installment plan. Familiarity grew comfortable and gave way to conversation as we observed the ebb and flow of tavern life.

It all started with casual flirting. She flirted. I was casual.

Hell, she flirted with everyone: men, women, and even the bartender's mangy tomcat. While I enjoyed the sometimes risqué banter, I never considered Darlene as potential girlfriend material. She was a young vixen, and I was an old wolf. I amused myself trying to sneak a peek down her blouse or up her skirt when I thought she wouldn't notice.

One Friday night, the stars governing our relationship aligned like the bars on a slot machine. Heads turned as Darlene strutted into the tavern in a blur of legs, cleavage, and the predatory smile of a fox. Her outfit left little to the imagination. Her mini-dress must have been a belt in a previous life, and her tissue-thin blouse was unbuttoned down to her navel. She wore no bra.

"That's a nice outfit you are almost wearing." I did a double take when she hopped up on the barstool next to mine.

"Panties optional dress code?" I asked with a nod of my head as I filed that image into my long-term memory vault.

"Like it? I'm going to get laid tonight. One of these stud-muffins is going home with me," she chuckled with a little shiver and scanned the bar for targets of opportunity. I grimaced, envy flavored a bit oddly by jealousy. What a curious blend of emotions for a virtual stranger.

I did an inventory of my own.

Most of the men in the tavern looked like drop-outs from Blubber Buddies or some such weight-watching group. I had recently gone from two hundred and fifteen pounds to a hundred and seventy-five. I felt authorized to gloat.

Wives or girlfriends escorted most of the men. Boyfriends accompanied a few others. Darlene's field of viable targets was limited unless she lowered her standards or went in for a threesome.

I pitied the lucky guy who won Darlene's attention. She had the uncanny ability to read people like a book and play them like a deck of cards.

"Compliments of the house." Our curious barkeep did a visual inventory of his own as he set a beautifully mixed and handcrafted White Russian in front of Darlene.

She took a small sip and savored it like a gourmet. "Perfect!"

She tilted her head back and wolfed it down in one long gulp. Yikes! Talk about power drinking. Darlene hopped down from her seat and like Alexander the Great, set out to conquer the known world.

I had to admire her style. She was the Alpha-Fox loose in the hen house, radiating sexual availability like a neon sign in the night. Darlene was in a class by herself, and that was a problem. She sparkled like a diamond in a coal bin and scared the shit out of the men she approached.

If anything, she was too beautiful and too self-assured. The males she flirted with as she worked her way around the tavern were flattered, flustered, and fearful of her attention. None of them dared to take the bait.

After ten or fifteen minutes of flagrantly flirting, Darlene returned to her seat to regroup and refuel. Our bartender presented her with another complimentary White Russian as his sacrifice to the Gods of Wishful Thinking.

"Thank you so much. You are such a sweetheart. Can I have another one to keep this one company?" Darlene touched his hand, and if her smile had been any warmer, the barkeep would have erupted into flame.

A few moments later, our generous drink master returned with three tall White Russians. "One is for you and the other two are honor guards for the dead soldiers." He pointed to the two empty glasses.

"I love this drink." She inhaled the beverage, chugging it down in one long gulp. I raised one eyebrow in puzzlement. How can anyone love a drink without taking the time to appreciate the subtle by-play of flavors?

Thirst quenched for the moment, Darlene resumed her quest for tonight's bed partner. Her second expedition of seduction ended in bewildered frustration.

"What the fucking hell? I usually have to beat men off with a stick." Shaking her head in disgust, she demolished another White Russian.

"Maybe you should offer to beat them off with a stick, you know, fifty shades of kinky?"

Darlene's eyes gave me a hard look. She was not amused. "Why? Do you want to get beat off with a stick?" she smiled before dispatching the last White Russian.

"Hell no! I hate splinters," I said.

"He shoots. He scores!" Darlene laughed as she raised her index finger and traced a point on the invisible blackboard in the air. "Nice one."

I shrugged my shoulders. I could feel the rising heat of a blush. I squirmed in my seat under her gaze. As Darlene studied me, her dark look of frustration gradually brightened, and her emerald eyes sparkled as her grim expression transformed into the predatory smile of a fox.

"I'm as horny as hell. Wanna fuck?" She leaned into me until our noses touched while her hand moved to my knee and slowly slid along the inside of my leg.

I answered by placing my hand on her knee and mirrored her journey of exploration. "Your place or mine?" I whispered. It was as cliché as shit, but I couldn't help myself. What could I say? She had just made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

Thus began our unlikely love affair.

We became romantically involved as much out of laziness as out of lust. Neither of us cared to invest the necessary time to search for the perfect partner, so we settled for close enough for right now. After we moved in together, I would joke that I was "robbing the cradle" when I took her to bed. She would always laugh and respond, "I guess that would make me a grave robber."

A few things attracted me to Darlene. The first was her personality. She was so easy going that I once tried to give her the nickname "Lake Placid." Still waters run deep, and it didn't end well.

"Okay, Dennis, that was a twofer." The book she was reading sailed across the room, missing my head by less than an inch.

"Watch it, you nearly hit me! What the hell is a twofer?"

"A twofer is the first and last time something happens. I hate nicknames. Why the fuck would I want to be named after a stagnant pond?" Her smile was a weird combo of mischief and annoyance. I took pet names off my to-do list.

The other thing was her attitude toward sex. Everyone needs a hobby and sex was her diversion from work. She collected orgasms like some folks collected postage stamps.

After a few months together, the real estate development company in which Darlene had invested fifteen years of her life went belly-up, and then her last two paychecks bounced. The rubber checks set up a cascading overdraft chain reaction.

Darlene's rent check went south, along with about twenty-five or thirty personal checks and ATM transactions; each bad check racked up a thirty-five dollar bank charge and twenty-five to thirty dollars in returned check merchant fees; her account soon was bleeding red ink by several thousand dollars.

The certified letter ordering our eviction was the last straw. Our financial camel lay mortally wounded, it's back broken beyond repair. We needed a new place to live, and we needed it fast.

We crisscrossed Denver and the surrounding suburbs chasing every "For Rent" sign we could find. We were always an hour or a day late or the price way beyond reach.

"Well, if you hear anything, please give me a call. Thank you," Darlene frowned as she hung up the phone. She looked at me, turned slightly and studied the calendar hanging on the refrigerator door, and looked back into my eyes.

"That was our last best lead, we're screwed." She slumped in her chair.

We sat across from each other at the kitchen table as, like an unwanted house guest, a shroud of gloom settled over the room. Out of options, we ran out of time. Eviction day was less than seventy-two hours away.

Darlene's posture suddenly changed as she sat upright in her chair; the corner of her mouth turned upwards, and a smile lit up her eyes. "Damn, can't believe I forgot 'em!" She slapped the palm of her hand on the table and let out a laugh. "Dennis, how would you like to live on a commune?"

"Huh?" What kinda random question was this and where was it going? Darlene's exotic view of life trended toward the spiritual rather than the religious. I braced myself for her answer. "What kind of Hippy Village are we talking about?"

"Hippy? I'm not talking about Woodstock, my love. My friends from college are living in an off-the-grid cabin in the Rockies. They owe me some money... maybe we can stay with them."

"What's their address?" If you learn where someone lives, you can start to make good guesses as to their culture.

"Honey, they don't have an address, and they're not on a road." Darlene moved to the living room sofa and I followed.

"How far are they from the road?"

This was getting interesting. The closer to the road, the more connected they were to conventional reality. I had visited many communes in my younger days, and everyone had a personality ranging from boring to batshit crazy. We sat together on the couch.

"Fifteen miles, give or take." She leaned into me as she sat next to me. "We've been friends for over fifteen years. We were friends back in college."

"What kind of friends?" If they had been living off the grid for fifteen years, this group had something going for it

"You know, friends who help friends. Anyway, they are heavy duty into the survivalist movement. They might let us stay with them."

Any group holding its own for fifteen years might be an answer to our current housing crisis, depending on the depth of the batshit. Too deep would be too weird.

"Okay, you've got my attention," I gave her a kiss, "Tell me everything you know. Who are these guys?"

We talked until there was no more to say.

"Stay or go. Your choice. Do you want to give them a try, at least for a few weeks?" Darlene asked.

Living as amateur survivalists, her friends occupied an off-the-grid cabin located somewhere in the Rocky Mountains about two hundred and fifty miles west of Denver.

The more I thought about it, the better it sounded. Living off the grid far from civilization was an attractive alternative to living in a cardboard box behind a Safeway Supermarket. Besides, I liked the high country and I had made several hiking trips into the mountains while stationed at Lowry Air Force Base prior to shipping out for an all-expense-paid tour of Vietnam.

"Hum, I'm in. Let's see if your friends will let us stay with them." I watched and listened as she dictated a text message requesting sanctuary for us, and shared her joy when she received an affirmative response a few minutes later.

"Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, it's off the grid we go," I sang, and Darlene joined in with a verse of her own.

"Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, off with clothes we go," as she turned the dwarf song into a stripper-gram for two.

More efficient than artful, she had me barefoot from my toes to my chin within a minute. Naked and laughing we sealed the deal by morning with a wild session of lovemaking. We were going to make a new life for ourselves. We were going off the grid.

The next two days passed in a blur as we raced to pack what we needed for our new lives. Our Rav4 got a new set of off-road tires along with a complete tune up and oil change. We sold everything we couldn't take with us. What we couldn't sell, we gave away. We were done with Denver.

We departed a few hours after sunrise and followed US-70 out of Denver. Within an hour we were up into the mountains, and four hours after that, we hit the town of Rifle and broke for lunch. I asked Darlene to stop at the local smoke shop. I had learned that our new home wasn't only remote; it was in the middle of fucking nowhere. The idea of running out of cigarettes a million miles from resupply was frightening.

I assumed our new off-the-grid home had some power, so I purchased an electric rolling machine. I then covered my bet; I bought two hand-powered rolling machines just to be safe. I then cleaned the shop out of their inventory of Zen rolling papers (three cases), along with sixty pounds of tobacco, two hundred cheap disposable lighters, and five tobacco pipes.

Darlene stood next to me as the cashier rang up the largest single purchase in the shop's history.

"Are you out of your mind? Who spends that kind of money on cigarettes? Seriously, we're broke and almost homeless," She shook her head.

"Sweetheart, my VA check is a direct deposit and it just hit my account last night. Where we're going, money ain't going to be of much use, so why not?" I added another handful of Bic lighters to the pile of merchandise. The total bill of sixteen hundred and forty-seven dollars and twenty-eight cents wiped out half my available cash.

The Zen cigarette tubes and sixty pounds of tobacco were too bulky to fit in the Rav's cargo bay, so I ended up securing my newly acquired stash to the vehicle's roof. I wrapped everything up in a tarp and triple tied it down with rope and bungee cords. The car looked like a band of gypsies owned it by the time I finished.

We turned north on Route 13, passed the town of Meeker two hours later, and turned onto a winding dirt road leading up into the mountains. About forty-five minutes later Darlene announced, "It won't be long now" for the twentieth time.

Darlene was a bright young lady. She had programmed a series of waypoints her friends had emailed her into her vehicle's GPS system. We followed the dirt road through a thick pine forest until the road devolved into not much more than a poorly marked trail.

The trail shrunk down to a path as we continued onward, and our path soon became nothing more than a series of GPS waypoints connected by miles of barren rock as we climbed above the tree line.

I asked Darlene after an hour of driving ever deeper into the mountain wilderness, "How long is not long?"

"We should be there within the hour," Darlene answered.

"Christ Almighty! Your friends aren't only off the grid, they're off the fucking map. Do you have any idea of where we really are?" I complained.

Darlene just shrugged her shoulders, smiled, and kept driving.

Our Rav4 reached a ridge crest which afforded us with a splendid view of a long, thin U-shaped valley nestled between two towering mountain ranges an hour later. We could see a building almost lost in the distance at the far end of the vale.

The structure was considerably larger than it had seemed from the ridge as we approached the dwelling. The rustic cabin looked like it was growing out of the side of the mountain upon closer examination. It was as much a log mansion as it was a log cabin. Solar panels covered the south facing steel roof, and a farmer's porch wrapped around three sides of the cabin. Buck Rogers meets Davy Crockett.

The sun had disappeared behind the snow-capped mountains. Night and the thermometer were both falling fast by the time we rolled to a stop in front of the cabin. A welcoming committee of at least two dozen women had gathered on the porch erupted in shouts of joy and hand waves when Darlene emerged from the vehicle.

The boisterous welcome turned to a frosty silence when I stepped out of the car. It were as if someone had pulled the plug on the PA system.

CHAPTER 2

Darlene stepped around the front bumper and gave me a hug as she whispered "Did I mention that this is an all woman survival commune?" in my ear.

"You forgot to share that little detail with me. What the fuck are we going to do now?" I whispered back.

Darlene was like that. She tended to skimp on the details and fill the void with trivia or useless information. Darlene held my hand as we broke from our embrace, and spoke to the assembled women on the porch. "I would like you to meet my lover, Dennis Richards, everyone. He's old, but he's a very nice guy once you have a chance to know him."

An older woman, who appeared to be the group's leader, stepped forward and said, "I'm Sheila Carson, Mr. Richards. Please come inside. I think we need to have a talk."

I had the same, uneasy "Oh crap! Now, what?" feeling that I used to have when I got summoned to the principal's office as a kid.

Sheila turned on her heels, walked inside, and the rest of us followed her into the cabin's great room. If the cabin had looked large from the outside, it looked like it went on forever standing in the middle of the hall. It was enormous. A massive freestanding stone fireplace dominated the center of the room, and a blazing fire radiated heat and light in all directions.

A cathedral ceiling towered over the open space, and rustic balconies ringed the wall on all sides at the second story level. Thousands of LED icicle lights hung from the balcony railings and stairways. A soft, comforting glow bathed the room.

Sheila directed us to follow her to her office upstairs. She stood about five feet six and was a good-looking woman about my age. Streaks of red highlighted her closely cropped brunette hair, and she appeared to be in excellent physical condition.

Her skin had the bronze tan of someone who was no stranger to hard outdoor work. Her face was more attractive than beautiful. She was wearing faded work jeans and a low-cut wool sweater, which allowed an excellent view of well-tanned medium-sized breasts and ample cleavage.

Sheila's office featured a large oaken desk and a stone fireplace. A picture window filled one wall with a breathtaking view of the frosted mountains painted silver in the light of a nearly full moon. A floor-to-ceiling bookcase crammed with books covered the opposite wall. There were several oriental rugs scattered about on the wood floor

"Make yourselves comfortable, I'll be right back." Sheila made a quick exit through a side door.

Her abrupt departure startled me. Something was brewing, and I wasn't sure I cared for the flavor. Darlene and I took a seat on a small sofa in front of a coffee table and exchanged worried glances while we waited.

I leaned close to her ear and whispered, "What the hell is going on? This ain't the warm and fuzzy welcome we expected."

"I know. Seriously, I don't understand. I told Sheila's assistant that you were coming with me, and she said, 'Great, the more, the merrier.'"

We could hear the muffled voices, but not the words, of two women engaged in a heated discussion in the next room. The conversation ended abruptly, and a moment later Sheila entered the office with another woman in tow.

"Your presence here presents us with something of a problem, Mr. Richards. Darlene sent us a text message to our satellite phone. She told us she was bringing her lover 'Denise' with her. It was on that basis that we gave our permission for you to join our family of sisters." Sheila crossed her arms and studied us closely.

Darlene let out a little gasp just before she burst out laughing. "Fucking auto-correct will get you every time. I dictated that message on my iPhone, and I never caught the error when it changed Dennis to Denise," Darlene said.

Oh, damn! Talk about getting off on the wrong foot. We were at the intersection of Colossal and Fuck Up. It took Sheila only a moment to absorb the implications of Darlene's unintended error. There was no conspiracy at work here, just faulty technology.

"Error or not, Mr. Richards' presence in our family of sisters might produce, er, unwanted sexual tension; that kind of stress can be bad for families," Sheila explained as she took a seat across from us.

"Seriously? If you're all lesbians, how can an old fart like me produce any sexual tension?" I protested.

"There are capital-L Lesbians, and there are lowercase-L lesbians, Mr. Richards, and then there are those who might want to find pleasure from a man out of mischief or mere curiosity. The fact that you're old makes you seem harmless, but I know better. You're not as safe as you appear. You have already seduced one of our first lesbian sisters and convinced her to take you on as a lover," Sheila answered as she glanced over at Darlene.

I also gave Darlene an inquiring look of my own. I had suspected, but never known for sure that my lady love walked both sides of the street.

Sheila leaned forward and looked directly into Darlene's eyes. "Since we're already on the subject, why on earth did you pick such an old guy for a lover in the first place? My God girl, he's old enough to be your father or even your grandfather."

Darlene laughed. "Everyone wants to know about our May-December relationship. I picked Dennis because he's low maintenance, easy to be with, and treats me with respect. He's a fantastic lover and knows how to make a woman happy. His tongue is very talented."

Sheila looked over at me and raised a questioning eyebrow. I just smiled back and shrugged as the "talented tongue" comment seemed to hang in the air forever.

She let the silence stretch out a bit, and then leaned across the coffee table, took Darlene's right hand in her own, and asked, "Tell me, dear sister, is his penis as talented as his tongue?"

I shifted in my seat and struggled to keep a neutral expression as the two women discussed my sexual performance. I couldn't imagine a more awkward conversation.

Darlene looked surprised at Sheila's question, and then looked thoughtful. She told Sheila after several moments of reflection, "His penis is untrained, and it doesn't work nearly as well as his tongue. Sometimes my lover can't get it up or keep it up. Other times his pecker has a mind of its own. He often suffers from premature ejaculation when he finally does get an erection."

Sheila glanced over at me and raised another questioning eyebrow. I just blushed, shrugged, and did my best to sink out of sight in the sofa. I tried to avoid any response that might extend discussion further. Darlene had a tendency to overshare information.

Turning toward her companion, Sheila asked, "Will you please show Darlene to her room and round up a few of the sisters to help unpack their vehicle, Lucia? I need to spend a few minutes to bring Dennis up to speed on the ground rules for our colony. Please let the kitchen crew and the others know that we may be a little late for dinner."

With a quick kiss on my lips, Darlene rose and give Sheila a slightly longer kiss as she followed Lucia out of the room. As the door closed, Sheila stood and beckoned me to follow her. "Let's adjourn to the next room where we can be more comfortable. We've got a lot to talk about."

There was no doubt about it, I was a stranger in a very strange land.

CHAPTER 3

The next room turned out to be the bedroom Sheila shared with her partner, Lucia. The walls were hand hewn pine planks decked out with bookcases and several very well done nude watercolor portraits of women.

A queen-size four-poster bed covered with a beautiful handmade quilt took up one wall, and a rustic looking nightstand with a large table lamp adorned with a stained glass shade provided most of the light in the room. The balance of the lighting came from a stone fireplace with several burning logs.

A huge bearskin spread out on the floor before the fire along with several large throw pillows offered comfortable seating. The room had an elegant, warm and cozy feel to it overall.

Sheila retrieved an amber-colored bottle and two glasses from the bookshelf and sat down on the rug. She patted a spot next to her as she invited me to join her at the fireplace.

"Dennis, would you care to join me in a glass of home-brewed brandy?"

"Only if you make mine a double." I was tempted to ask for a triple, but I let it pass. A double would do for now.

Taking a seat on the rug next to Sheila, I made myself as comfortable as possible. I was no longer as flexible as I had been when I was younger. Moreover, sitting on the floor was hardly my preferred mode of relaxation.

I took a sip of the offered brandy. Oh my God, it was as smooth as silk, and I could feel it filling me with a warm glow.

"Tell me Dennis, how comfortable are you with public displays of nudity?" Sheila asked as she took a sip of her brandy.

I nearly snorted the drink out of my nose as I coughed and choked in surprise. What the fuck kind of question was that?

"I don't have a problem with public nudity," I regained my composure. "I've visited plenty of nude beaches in my life."

"Did you get nude yourself or just visit as a voyeur?" Sheila inquired.

"I got as naked as everyone else. Why do you ask?" I responded.

"Because our dress code most assuredly is clothing optional when we're in the cabin. Most of us go skyclad when we aren't working or cooking, or if safety requires we remain covered up. I'm glad that you're comfortable with this," Sheila said, as she pulled her sweater over her head and exposed her braless chest.

I used to think I was pretty jaded and nothing would surprise me. Wrong. What do you say to a naked lady? I felt like I was playing a bit part on candid camera.

Neatly folding her garment, she rose to her knees, unbuckled her jeans, and slid them down to her ankles. My eyes widened in surprise. Sheila wore no underwear, and her naked body showed no trace of tan lines. My head was spinning.

Seriously, the same dizzy feeling I had when standing at the edge of a cliff swept over me in a wave of cultural vertigo as I struggled to keep my mental balance. The normal social landmarks outlining the boundaries of acceptable behavior were either missing or obscured in this strange new world.

Sheila folded her jeans, placed them on top of her sweater, leaned back on the pillow behind her, and closed her eyes, "Ahh, that feels much more comfortable. I'm almost getting to the point where I hate wearing clothing," she said with a deep sigh.

I took the opportunity to examine Sheila's exposed body as she lay naked next to me. I was trying to engrave this moment in my memory for later replay. Maybe it will make more sense the second time around. Her breasts were still pretty firm, and they showed few of the signs of aging or sagging, apart from a few stretch marks, which came along with advancing years.

Sheila's nipples were about the size of the tip of my little finger, and her dark brown areolas were roughly the size of fifty-cent pieces. Her stomach was flat with just a few wrinkles above a thin patch of reddish-brown pubic hair. She was in better physical shape than most women half her age. Either that, or she was a very high mileage thirty-year-old.

Her face had the usual lines and weather worn creases of someone who spent most of their time outdoors, and there was only a slight hint of a double chin. She opened her eyes and caught me studying her body.

"Do I meet with your approval?"

I was stone-cold busted. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare. I don't often find myself alone with a naked woman," I stammered. "This whole thing is way too weird. Talk about being beyond my comfort zone; you're naked. Now you tell me there's an entire group of naked women just beyond this door," I looked around and waved my arms,

"and then there's all this, this cabin in the middle of fucking nowhere. It's just everything. I don't mind being outside my zone, but I still need the time to process it."

I continued. "Take this cabin, for example. It didn't grow here. It seems to be at least ten or fifteen years old, and it must have cost a fortune. What did you guys do? Win the lottery or something?" I said, waving my arms around the room.

"You're either a good guesser or a very lucky boy. That's exactly how this place came to be. Do you remember when everyone was freaking out over a seventy-five million dollar jackpot that remained unclaimed for almost a year nearly twenty years ago? That was the sisters and me," Sheila said.

"It took us that long to set up a corporation to hold the ticket. We decided that we would fly under the radar. We didn't want the media attention, I'm sure you can understand." She patted my leg.

"How the hell did you build this structure? You needed some heavy equipment to put this place together, and there are no roads in or out of the valley?"

"We cut and milled all the wood we needed on site. A French Canadian Heavy Lift Helicopter Service brought in all the necessary equipment to complete this building and about a dozen utility structures. I'll give you and Darlene a tour of our colony tomorrow," Sheila offered.

I numbly nodded while reaching into my shirt pocket. I needed a smoke to calm my nerves.

With the pack of smokes in my hand, I asked, "Is it okay with you if I have a cigarette?"

"Shit! You've got cigarettes? I haven't had one in years!" She took the pack from my hand and tapped two cigarettes out before setting the pack down next to her leg.

Sheila gave me one before rolling onto her stomach. Slightly spreading her legs for balance, she stretched forward and reached into the fireplace to find an unburned twig to use as a match to light her cigarette.

Her buttocks were on vivid display as she sprawled before me. Each rounded cheek was firm, compact, and well-tanned. Her small puckered brown anus was clearly visible in the valley between them just above the lips of her vagina. I could feel a stiffening in my shorts as my body responded to the vision before me.

I was going to have to get my aging and raging hormones in check if nudity was going to be the new normal. I had a hunch that sprouting a boner every time one of the women of the colony bent over wasn't going to cut the mustard.

I reached into my pocket, pulled out my Bic lighter, and lit my cigarette while Sheila worked to get her twig lit. I then tapped her on the leg and offered her my torch.

Sheila relaxed against her pillow for the next few minutes and puffed away at her first cigarette in years. "Damn! I had forgotten how much I enjoyed a good smoke." She laughed and blew a perfect smoke ring and then another.

"Keep the pack; it's my treat. There are plenty more in the car." I watched the smoke rings until they dissolved in the air. I was impressed. Not many smokers could blow a quality smoke ring.

"Really? How much is plenty more?" Sheila asked.

"I brought enough tobacco to roll at least twenty-four thousand cigarettes. That should last a few years." I told Sheila about my bulk tobacco purchase in Rifle, Colorado.

My eyes kept drifting back to Sheila's breasts and down to her pubic hair and vagina as we talked. I finally said, "I know that staring is rude, Sheila, but it's hard to keep my eyes away from your body. You're a very attractive woman." I felt my erection twitch.

"I noticed, but don't worry about it. I didn't give you much warning before changing into my birthday suit, and this was a test. I wanted to see how you would handle female nudity, and you did just fine. I'm frankly flattered when someone admires my body, even if it's a man. Just try not to drool," Sheila said with a grin as she glanced at my crotch.

"I understand the usual norms around social nudity, and it doesn't include unwanted sexual aggression. Just because a woman is naked doesn't give anyone permission to grope or fondle her. I get it." I rested my hand in my lap. Just to be on the safe side.

"That is almost a feminist viewpoint for a man. Maybe you'll be able to fit in here after all." Sheila stretched and stood on her tiptoes as circulation returned to her legs.

"I'm famished and it's getting late, Dennis. Let's continue this conversation later, but we need to get downstairs before there's nothing left of dinner in the meantime." I gratefully took her hand as she helped me to my feet. I have the knees of a man twice my age.

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